

THE ABORIGINES OF THE VICTORIAN HIGH PLAINS

By ALDO MASSOLA

Introduction

The scattered information about the aborigines formerly inhabiting the Victorian high plains is here brought together. No particulars, however insignificant they may seem to be, have been omitted, and no personal embellishment or supposition has been added. The sources of information are in the bibliography at the end of the paper.

Historical

The high plains were discovered in 1824 and occupation begun in 1839. In that, and the following year, the natives gave some trouble, e.g. the Faithfull massacre, cattle stealing, attacks on outstations, etc. In 1852 gold was discovered, and an avalanche of Europeans and Asiatics poured into the high plains. The aborigines were engulfed and simply disappeared. By 1862 only four, with a doubtful fifth, remained.

Up to this period no record of aboriginal life appears to have been collected. It was not until 1895 that Helms gave the first published account of the natives. His information was obtained from 'old settlers'. The next author was A. W. Howitt, in 1904, whose information had come from an aboriginal woman whose name he does not give. It is obvious that much of the ceremonial life would be unknown to her. The last two aborigines of the high plains were two women: Black Mag, who died of exposure after a drunken bout at Corryong in 1883, and Charlotte, who died in the 1890's. It is possible that Howitt's informant was one of these.

The third, and last recorder was R. H. Mathews, who surprisingly claims to have received his information while 'journeying amongst the remnants of the tribes' subsequent to 1898. Writing in 1909 he agrees in a broad sense with the former authors, although his name for the tribes differs considerably from the other two.

According to Howitt, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Victorian Tablelands called themselves Ya-itma-thang. The tribal name was derived from the affirmative, in this case, 'Ya-yau', = yes, to which was affixed 'Thang', speech or tongue. That is, they were the people speaking the language which said 'Ya' for Yes.

The Ya-itma-thang occupied the lower plateaux all the year round, and visited the higher tablelands during the spring, or as soon as the snows had melted, and during the summer months. They were divided into two sections, of which one, the Theddora-mittung, occupied the country around the sources of the Mitta-Mitta and its tributaries down to the Gibbo Mt, and the upper Kiewa and the Ovens up to Mt Buffalo. The other section, the Kandengora-mittung lived on the Omeo plains, along the Limestone R. to its junction with the Indi, and along the Tambo to Tongio-mungie. The word 'mittung', affixed to their tribal name, means Men ÷ thus Theddora-mittung = Theddora — men.

The Ya-itma-thang were on friendly terms with the Ngarico of Monaro, and the Wolgal, who ranged as far north as Queanbeyan. Their traditional enemies were the Kulin of central Victoria, the Twofold Bay natives, the Kurnai of Gippsland and

the Murray tribes below Albury. In short, it seems that while friendly towards other highland people they were at war with the tribes of the plains.

Mathews, though broadly agreeing with this version, has a different name for the tribe, which he calls the Dyingningmidhang, and divides it into two linguistic groups, the Dhudhuroa and the Minyambuta, whose territory roughly corresponded to Howitt's Theddora-mittung and Kandengora-mittung.

Government

The oldest man of the tribe was recognized as chief, but in time of war main authority rested with the ablest warrior, who was automatically obeyed and his advice followed even by the elders.

The Family and Marriage Rules

The Ya-itma-thang had the two-class system of marriage, in which males of one class had to marry females of the other. A girl was promised as soon as born and given to her husband when mature. This practice was controlled by the rule that a man married the daughter, own or tribal, of his mother's brother. Descent, according to Howitt, was through the females, while Mathews states that it was only the northern group who had female descent, and that the southern group had descent through the male.

It sometimes happened that a girl would elope with a man other than the one she was promised to, or the one she could legally marry. In this case they were pursued, and if caught would be severely beaten. If sexual intercourse was contracted outside the marriage rules the punishment would be death. Adultery was punished in the same way.

It was not considered adultery for a brother to have sexual intercourse with his brother's wife, and during the absence of the husband the nearest of kin had marital rights with the wife or wives. The husbands of two sisters were considered to be brothers. Polygamy was customary, and the man who had the most sisters or daughters would naturally have the most wives, as he would have a better chance of obtaining these by exchanging the one for the other. Women could also be freely given as gifts, although remuneration was at times made by handing over weapons and other useful utensils.

Young people were strictly forbidden to have sexual intercourse, and would be severely beaten if caught. The sexes were kept separated from an early age. During her menses, a woman would bind a string around both arms to signify her condition. At the time she would be considered 'unclean', viz. if she crossed a stream no one would drink from this stream below her crossing place.

Birth and Childhood

Usually, as her time was approaching, the woman would retire to a secluded spot, and manage her confinement without any assistance. The child would be named after some special locality at or near which he or she was born, or after something unusual happening at that time. Children were allowed a great deal of freedom, but were taught obedience. This was enforced by threats of visits from evil spirits, who would cause them to contract diseases which would eventually kill them.

Initiation

At about the age of 14 to 16 years the boy would have one of his upper central incisors knocked out. This ceremony which lasted some days would make the boy a youth, or 'Kurrungong'. At the age of 18 or 20 he would be made a man, or warrior,

'Wahu', by the performance of another protracted ceremony from which women were excluded. Here, all the hair of his head was slowly singed off with a burning brand. Later, three men would join the ceremony waving green boughs in certain directions, at the same time uttering the name of the district or tribe living in that direction. Each name was prefixed by the exclamation 'Wau-Wau', and in the case of enemy groups followed by imprecations. This was to indicate to the newly-made 'Wahu' with whom he was to be friendly, and who were his foes.

At the conclusion of this ceremony women were again permitted to be present and the newly-made 'Wahu' had the right to choose one from amongst their number for that night, but that night only, always providing that she was of the right marriage group.

Neither circumcision nor subincision was practised by the Ya-ithma-thang.

The Ya-itma-thang used the bull-roarer during their ceremonies. This was swung in order to keep women and uninitiated men away. They were led to believe that the thundering noise was the voice of Papang, the All-Father, who had come down from the sky to make the boys into men. This belief in an All-Father is all that has been recorded of their religion.

Initiation of Girls

At the first signs of her first menses the girl was taken into the bush by some old women. Here her arms were bandaged with strips of possum skin, and her body anointed with possum fat and powdered charcoal. Next she was lifted on to the fork of a tree six or eight feet from the ground, and a fire of green boughs lit under her. This smoking process would last some hours, and often was repeated the next day or two. Following the smoking the girl was given a pubic fringe to wear, and was then considered marriageable.

Messengers

Messengers were sent to summon friendly tribes to a ceremony or to war against a common enemy. Two messengers generally went together so that one could sleep whilst the other kept guard over him.

Decorations

When at war or during ceremonies the men would decorate their bodies with paint. The colours used were white, red and black, The white was obtained from pipeclay, the red from raddle (red ochre) and the black was charred seedstalks of the grass-tree. These, when powdered and mixed with fats, would stick on the body for a long period of time.

Clothing

The only clothing worn was a fringe of narrow strips of hide, suspended back and front from a belt around the waist. This belt was made of a string of twisted possum fur, twelve to fifteen feet long. To put it on they fastened one end to a tree, and holding the other end to their waist would turn around and around until completely wound. Both sexes wore this fringe. During cold weather both sexes also wore a possum fur cloak, or a mat of kangaroo skins. When not used as a garment this latter would be used by the men as a carry-all.

The body was marked with keloids, which were produced by incising the flesh with a sharp stone, and rubbing the wounds with ashes. The keloids were made on the back of the youth when he was 17 to 20 years of age. When these healed, the

chest and later the arms would be similarly decorated. Females also wore keloids, but not to the same extent as the men. Keloids were supposed to indicate family and tribal connections.

In both sexes, the septum of the nose was pierced, and a section of kangaroo bone carried in the hole. Women were particularly fond of this ornament.

Camp Life

Habitations were a simple and rough type of shelter constructed by leaning sheets of bark against a framework of sticks.

Fire was kindled by the drill method. Two pieces of the seed stalk of the grass tree (*Xanthorrhoea*) were used for this purpose, one piece being laid on the ground and the other, sharpened to a point, was pressed against it and rapidly twirled between the hands. This soon generated enough heat to produce fire. Their food was cooked either in the ashes, or in a stone-lined pit, or oven.

Food

Food consisted of all kinds of game, birds' eggs, reptiles and insects, as well as roots and bulbs, seeds and fruits. One kind of food, however, was praised above all others: the Bogong moth.

In favourable seasons the snow would melt on the plateaux by October, and the natives would start their upward marches to secure these moths. Usually it was not until the end of December that the friendly tribes would be invited to partake of this delicacy, when from 500 to 700 aborigines were estimated to assemble on the high plains. To collect the moths, the natives, brandishing a burning bush, would enter as far as possible in any of the cracks in the rocks. The thickly congregated insects found in these crevices would be scorched, and would fall into kurrajong fibre nets or kangaroo skins which had been stretched underneath in readiness to receive them. The bogong were then unceremoniously dropped into the hot ashes of the camp fires, where the wings and legs would soon drop off, and the insect shrivel to the size of a grain of wheat. After freeing them of the ashes by winnowing, the natives would eat them by the handful. The bogong are said to be sweetish and nutty, and quite good eating.

Cannibalism was practised, and at every opportunity they would eat the flesh of their enemies, but not of members of their own tribe.

Weapons

Their weapons consisted of clubs, boomerangs, shields, stone-headed axes and three or four kinds of spears, made of reeds, seedstalks of the grass tree, box-tree and ironbark. The reed and grass tree spears were thrown with the spear-thrower, the others by hand. Boomerangs were of two kinds, the heavier fighting type, and the return boomerang. Yam-sticks for digging out roots were a convenient and necessary tool in common use. For carrying water they used bark vessels, shaped like canoes. In order to make these, a piece of bark with the ends thinned out would be placed in the hot ashes of a fire, to render the bark pliable, when it would be folded and tied at the ends.

The kurrajong nets for collecting the Bogong moths have already been mentioned. These had a very fine mesh and, for better handling, were attached laterally to two wooden sticks. The fibres used in making the nets were taken from a shrub of the *Pimelia* species, which grew plentifully along the rivers. Both the shrub and the fibre were called Kurrajong by the natives. The making of the thread necessitated

immersing the bark in water for a length of time, and subsequently, beating it soft, thus freeing the fibres to be spun. This was women's work.

Canoes

Canoes were of two kinds: those made of bark were made exactly like the water vessels, while others were veritable dug-outs, made by chopping and burning out the unwanted timber of tree trunks. Clay was used for stopping any leaks.

Stone Implements

Judging by recorded finds, their stone implements included chipped hand axes, ground-edge axes, ground-edge chisels, and hammer stones. None of the smaller conventionalized types of implements has been reported. A number of axe-sharpening stones has been found. The material used in making these tools includes metamorphosed mudstone, chert, quartzite, felspar porphyry, diorite, and chialstolite slate. The grinding stones are made of sandstone.

It is noteworthy that all the recorded specimens came from above the snow line.

Cave Paintings

Two rock shelters bearing painted designs have been found in the territory of this tribe. The designs include human and animal figures and are executed in red ochre. Because of their exposed situation the paintings are now badly faded and hard to interpret.

Language

Short vocabularies of the language spoken by these people have been published. These are listed in the bibliography at the end of this paper.

Sickness and Death

They firmly believed that all sickness was caused by an evil spirit called Jakkandibbi. It was also believed that malicious persons could throw certain small stones, called 'gibba', and cause them to enter the body of an enemy. This, of course, was done by magic, and the victim would not be aware of what befell him for some time, but would later feel discomfort and pain. These stones, however, could be removed by their own doctors or magicians, who would suck the affected part until eventually the 'gibba' were removed. This performance was coupled with violent gesticulations and strange mutterings on the part of the doctor and followed by the patient taking certain bulbs or herbs.

In the case of death great lamentations and self laceration, especially by the women took place. The body was tightly corded, with the knees drawn towards the abdomen and after being wrapped in bark was disposed of by either placing it in a hollow tree, or in a sitting position in a hole dug in the ground. In some cases a cavity or side chamber was made at the bottom of a deep hole, and the body placed in this cavity, which was then walled up with stones or logs, and the grave filled in. The idea of the side chamber was to confuse the spirit or ghost of the dead, who would not know how to get out and frighten or harm the living.

Conclusions

At this point I offer some comments and arrive at some conclusions. The aboriginal inhabitants of the highlands were of the same race, and had the same cultural traits as all the tribes round about them. The structure of the language, tribal organization, initiation ceremonies, belief in an All-Father and food habits were the same.

The differences in the names by which these people were known to Howitt and Mathews were no doubt dialectical differences as spoken by their respective informants. The same also applies to T. Mitchell who calls them Pallanganmiddah. Howitt calls the Ya-itma-thang the people who say 'Ya' for 'Yes', Mathang possibly being the same or a variant of Mittung = people. Mathews's Dyinningmiddhang is very likely: Dyinnin = yes and middhang, or the people that say 'Dyinn' for 'Yes'. Howitt calls the two sections Theddora and Kandengora. These correspond to Mathews's Dhudhuroa and Minyambutta. It is obvious that the two, the Theddora and the Dhudhuroa are the same. In each case the meaning is dhudhu or theddo, = no, and roa, or ra, shortened from whroa or whroo, = lip, i.e. the section of the people who say 'Ya' for 'Yes' are distinguished by the way they say 'No'. The same argument can be followed with the second section. Kandengora thus becomes kandengo, = no, and ra, = lip; while the meaning of Minyambuta is probably minyambu, no and ta or ra, = lip.

These tribes were inhabitants of the high plains for the same reason that other tribes were inhabitants of rain forests or deserts. This was their country, they knew every rock and water hole, where food was obtainable, and in what season. Their ancestors lived there before them, their Totemic centres were there. Even if given the choice of changing their habitat with, say, one of the coast tribes, they would not have accepted it. This applies to all aborigines, anywhere in Australia.

Owing to the fact that these particular people inhabited the mountains they had access to a class of food that was not available to other tribes except by invitation, the Bogong moth. As this moth has a place in the ecology of the high plains, a few words about it may be appropriate.

The Bogong moth, sometimes known as the plague cut worm (*Agrotis infusa*) belongs to the Noctuidae family. It inhabits the Southern Alps where it frequently appears in countless numbers. In favourable seasons the swarms may also be seen along the eastern coast line as far as Sydney, and sometimes odd moths may be collected on ships far out on the Tasman Sea. The larvae of *Agrotis infusa* is a typical cut worm, and does a great deal of damage to pastures and gardens. The fat content of the moth varies from 51% to 75% of the gross weight, depending on the time of the year and the sex of the insect. Its food value is thus considerable, and eye witnesses describe the natives as looking quite fat, and as having glossy and healthy skins when they returned from the mountains.

With the passing of the aborigines these legions of bogongs and their larvae would have presented a problem of the first magnitude, but for the tremendous increase of the crow population. These birds always have congregated on the mountain tops to feed on the swarms of moths. Their numbers, however, were kept in check by the natives, who, incidentally, ate the crows as well as the moths. The dingo and the native cat also contributed to keep the numbers of both the moths and the crows down. But now, the number of crows feeding undisturbed upon the moths is so large that, as one eye witness stated, when disturbed they rose in the air like a cloud. It has been asserted that the crows are fonder of this insect than of anything else, and that they will not touch dead or dying sheep while the Bogong moths are about.

Bibliography

HISTORICAL

- ANDREWS, A., 1920. The first settlement of the Upper Murray. Sydney.
MILLER, R. R., 1934. The Upper Murray. Melbourne.

ETHNOLOGICAL

- HELMS, R., 1895. Anthropological notes. *Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S.W.* (2nd Ser.) 10: 387.
HOWITT, A. W., 1904. The native tribes of South-East Australia. London.
MATHEWS, R. H., 1904. Ethnological Notes on the Aboriginal Tribes of N.S.W. and Victoria.
J. Roy. Soc. N.S.W. 38: 203.

STONE IMPLEMENTS

- FISCH, P., 1953. Visit to Mt Buller. *Vict. Nat.* 69: 150.
MITCHELL, S. R., 1940. Aborigines on Mount Buffalo. *Vict. Nat.* 56: 184.

CAVE PAINTINGS

- MASSOLA, A., 1960. Native painted shelter at Beechworth. *Vict. Nat.* 77: 97.
MITCHELL, S. R., 1954. Petrographs in the Koetong Creek Valley. *Vict. Nat.* 70: 219.
TUGBY, D. I. 1953. Conic Range rock shelter. *Mankind* 4: 446.

LANGUAGE

- BULMER, J., 1887. Vocabulary of the language spoken at Omeo. *Curr's Australian Race*. III: 558.
MATHEWS, R. H., 1909. The Dhudhuroa language of Victoria. *Amer. Anthropol* (N.S.) XI: 278.
MITCHELL, T., 1878. Vocabulary of Pallanganmiddah Tribe at Tangambalanga. *Smyth's Aborigines of Victoria*. II: 67.